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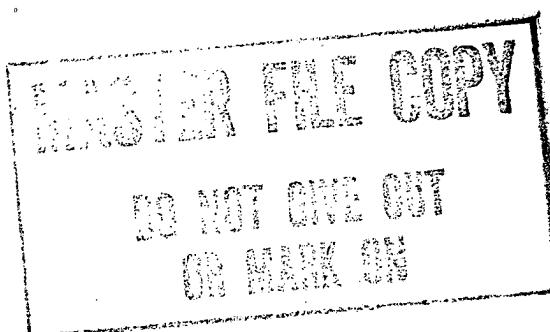
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# The Salvadoran Military: A Mixed Performance

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An Intelligence Assessment



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ALA 84-10060  
June 1984

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# The Salvadoran Military: A Mixed Performance

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An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by [redacted] Office  
of African and Latin American Analysis. It was  
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Comments and queries are welcome and may be  
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**Scope Note**

This paper tracks the progress of the Salvadoran military's transformation from a traditional Central American institution into a counterinsurgent force. As a building-block effort, it does not comparatively assess the performance of the Salvadoran military against that of the guerrillas.

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## The Salvadoran Military: A Mixed Performance

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### Key Judgments

*Information available  
as of 1 June 1984  
was used in this report.*

El Salvador since 1979 has made significant progress in expanding, reorganizing, and equipping its armed forces to fight a counterinsurgent war. These force improvements, achieved with assistance from the United States, have enabled the military to hold an increasingly well-armed guerrilla force at bay while improving its own field performance. These achievements, however, have not led to overall gains on the ground, as the guerrillas still dominate at least as much of the country as they did two years ago.

The experience with force development over the past few years suggests to us that Salvadoran military leaders will be capable of continued gradual progress and partial success in molding the armed forces into a more effective counterinsurgency force over the short term. Other observers, most notably some in our Embassy in San Salvador and at the US Southern Command, perceive the Salvadoran military to have made more substantial progress in the past few months and foresee a relatively steadier and more rapid improvement in the future. They point to a variety of factors such as a radical shift in attitude and increased creativity among the Salvadoran military leadership, greater receptivity to US recommendations, and more units responding effectively to battlefield pressure.

Emergence of a tough, independently capable modern military is, in our view, many years away. Efforts to push force development even more rapidly than presently planned could prove counterproductive, undermining the traditional military system before new approaches can become accepted and take root. By the same token, sustaining at least present levels of US support is essential to El Salvador's holding the insurgents at bay until political, economic, and social changes can better contribute to turning the tide.

Force development to date has been substantial. Overall troop strength has more than tripled since 1979 to almost 40,000. This includes some 28,000 personnel in the three armed services and over 11,000 in the public security forces. The increased troop strength generally enables deployments against guerrilla concentrations without leaving less contested areas of the country unprotected. A much expanded junior officer corps, the availability of mobile communications gear and light infantry weapons, and improved reconnaissance capability are encouraging adaptation to leader-intensive small-unit tactics. About 14,000 Salvadorans have received US training in areas ranging from counterinsurgent operations to equipment maintenance, although not all of the US-trained troops remain on active duty.

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[redacted]

Improved strategic planning has given the Salvadorans a framework for concentrating limited resources in key areas, integrating civic action with the military effort, and developing civil defense forces.

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[redacted] recent advancement of officers with field experience is beginning to strengthen command authority, while intelligence collection has increased dramatically as a result of strong US support.

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Government campaigns over the past two years have shifted but not reduced the overall area under guerrilla domination, however. In fact, National Guard troops have been pulled back from numerous outposts, leaving more villages now without a regular government presence than two years ago. Nevertheless, during the recent election the military successfully conducted operations aimed at preventing the guerrillas from disrupting the balloting.

While the military is showing an increasing ability to address some of its shortcomings, we believe the combat effectiveness of the Salvadoran armed forces has been impeded by a number of factors:

- Some of the force improvement programs are still under way or are being modified and have not yet had their full battlefield impact. Limitations on the numbers and duties of US training personnel also temper combat expectations.
- Funding shortfalls have weakened combat support and prevented the development of peripheral programs, such as incentive pay and support for civil defense units, needed to sustain combat gains.
- An institutional reluctance at times to proceed with US-sponsored programs has delayed conversion of the military into a counterinsurgency force.

Continued force improvements will allow the armed forces to maintain military pressure on the insurgents and prevent the situation from deteriorating sharply in the year ahead, in our view, but they are not likely to provide the basis for a military breakthrough, as long as external support for the guerrillas continues. On the basis of performance to date, we expect leadership attitudes to continue to evolve during the coming year, though somewhat slowly and unevenly. We believe that expansion and reorganization will continue to strain available officers and training programs, resulting in the fielding of some units poorly prepared for combat, and a substantial casualty rate. There are likely to be further losses—if at a diminished rate—of weapons and supplies to the enemy.

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Military development will continue to suffer from budget constraints. Furthermore, with no significant military industries or alternative suppliers, the government will probably have to continue to spend a large proportion of US aid on ammunition and other expendables at the expense of longer term investments in military hardware and training. We expect financial pressures to grow as the war intensifies, the payroll expands, loans come due, and medical and death benefits burgeon.

Since a breakthrough appears unlikely on the battlefield over the short term, political factors may hold the key to the strategic balance. The actions of the new Christian Democratic government of Napoleon Duarte will influence both the level of US aid and the amount of attention the defense leadership gives to the war effort. Certainly, continued indications that the armed forces are resigned to a new relationship with civil authority would permit military leaders to concentrate more fully on the war; on the other hand, if top leaders become preoccupied with political events in San Salvador for an extended period of time, they would be unable to orchestrate combat actions, and potential tactical opportunities could be dissipated.

Washington's leverage in further accelerating the development of the Salvadoran armed forces is constrained by Salvadoran culture and institutions. Considerable strides have been made in the technical modernization of the Salvadoran military, but, in our judgment, leadership attitudes and institutional procedures still require significant additional changes to meet the guerrilla threat. These have shown the least improvement over the past few years, both because of the slow pace of institutional evolution and sensitivity over the US role. Recent reorganization and reassessments of military commanders, combined with changes in civilian leadership as a result of the 1984 elections, may result in some acceleration of the needed changes.

We believe US pressure to promote force development can, if not carefully orchestrated, strain El Salvador's capacity to absorb new technology and force-management ideas and nurture a counterproductive dependence on the United States. Greatly expanded or more sophisticated assistance would probably require the United States to increase its advisory presence substantially to enable the Salvadorans to make use of the aid, thus risking leaving Salvadoran officers feeling that they were not in control and weakening the resolve of the High Command.

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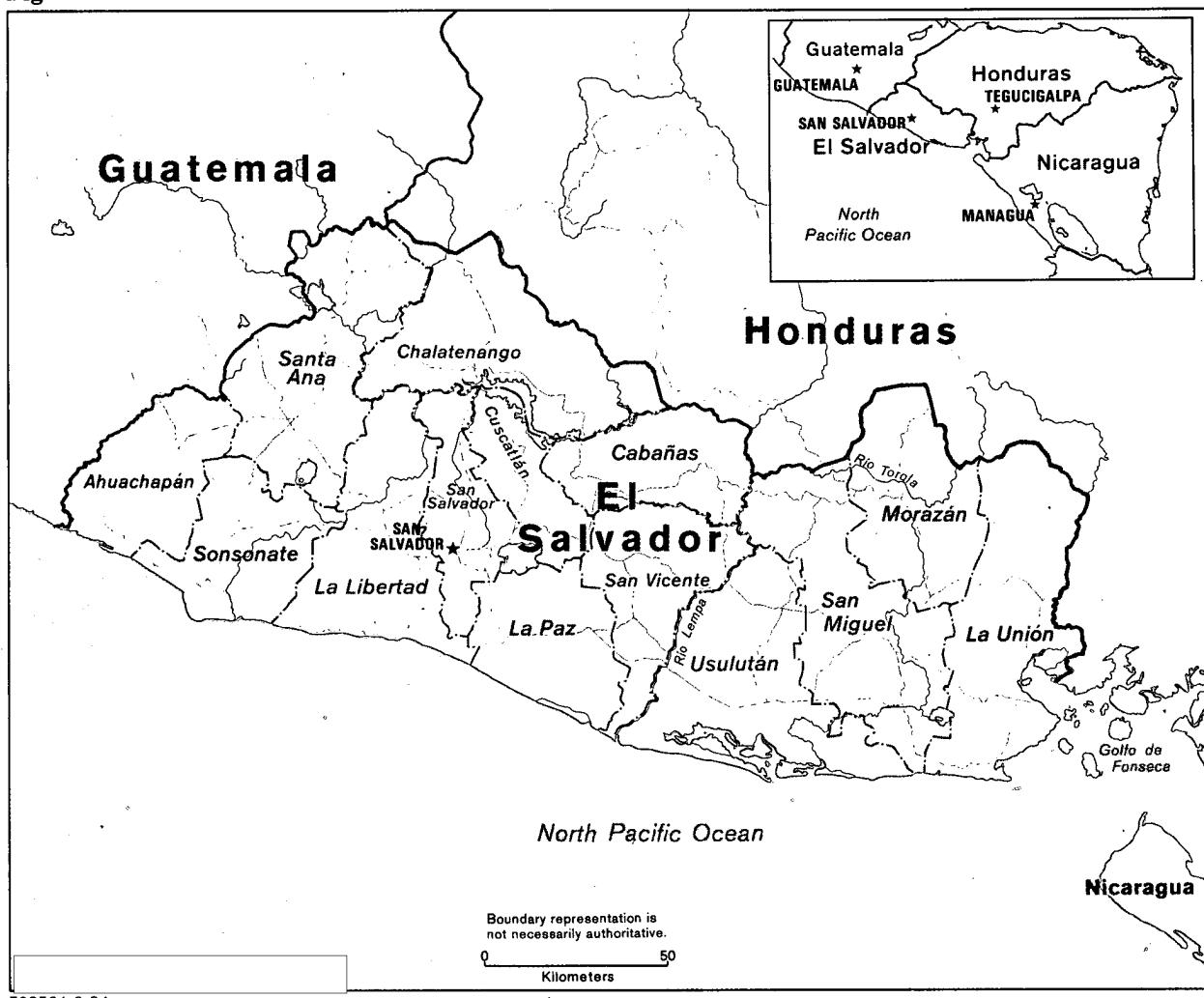
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## The Salvadoran Military: A Mixed Performance

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### Introduction

Despite several years of substantial US assistance, the battlefield situation in El Salvador is stalemated. Tactical swings and nonmilitary variables obscure the long-term direction of the war. Definite progress has been made in the technical modernization of the Salvadoran armed forces, but a number of factors—military traditions, incompletely completed programs, funding shortfalls, and enemy improvements—has limited the translation of force improvements into battlefield gains. This paper focuses on the period since January 1982 and examines the extent to which the Salvadoran armed forces—with little previous experience fighting guerrillas and with limited resources—have been able to conduct a counterinsurgency war.<sup>1</sup>

initiative and prevented the development of military staffs. Institutional cohesiveness was reinforced from time to time through purges of officers whose political views deviated too far from the conservative norm.

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Lacking a real external threat, the armed forces occupied themselves with maintaining domestic order. Tensions with neighboring states flared from time to time, but open hostilities, such as the brief war with Honduras in 1969, were rare. The growth of public security forces resulted in overlapping functions and institutional jealousies but did not reduce the internal security interests of the regular services. Use of force to control political dissension and social protests made the armed forces unpopular over the years.

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### Military Traditions

El Salvador's military leaders, backed by a relatively small<sup>2</sup> but generally cohesive armed force, have long dominated the country's political affairs despite constitutional efforts to promote civilian governments. This heavy involvement in politics, we believe, has prevented full attention to professional military matters and in recent years has impeded the Salvadoran defense establishment's ability to conduct the war.

As a conventionally organized peacetime force, the Salvadoran military was unprepared for the rigors of rural guerrilla warfare. Years of calm encouraged a casual attitude toward military duties, lack of strategic planning, absentee leadership, a garrison-oriented lifestyle, and the use of local reserve personnel more for political intelligence work than security duties. A large national manpower pool reduced the need for reenlistments, and almost all recruits left the service after their 18-month tours,

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According to numerous academic and intelligence studies, the 20 to 30 officers who graduated each year from the Salvadoran military academy in recent decades formed an elite clique. Class members were promoted together, protected each other's careers, and made decisions as a group, largely ignoring the formal chain of command. Departmental posts were awarded for political favors more than for professional competence. A personalistic style of leadership where authority was rarely delegated discouraged

either to take better paying jobs in the public security forces or to return to civilian life. Training focused on classroom instruction rather than hands-on experience and field maneuvers. Textbook tactics stressed large-scale sweep operations. Only cursory attention was paid to tactical intelligence and reconnaissance skills. Even companies garrisoned together rarely operated together, providing scant exercise of command and control procedures and no joint-service experience. The Salvadoran equipment inventory consisted of limited numbers of infantry weapons, aircraft, patrol boats, vehicles, and support items from different epochs and different countries. There were no notable domestic military industries. The armed

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<sup>1</sup> Our analysis draws extensively on US attaché reporting, with supplemental information from US Embassy [redacted]

[redacted] The study also benefits from interviews with a variety of Defense Department [redacted] personnel who have been in El Salvador or are currently involved with Salvadoran programs and issues.

<sup>2</sup> Regular troops comprised less than 0.2 percent of El Salvador's 4.6-million population in 1979, ranking the country behind most other Latin American nations in terms of a military-to-civilian ratio.

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**The Salvadoran Defense Establishment**  
(Total Strength: 39,800)

**Military Services (28,300)**

**Army.** The Salvadoran Army comprises 70 percent of men under arms, having expanded from about 7,000 troops in 1979 to 27,300 in early 1984. It is the government's best equipped military force. The current close relationship with the United States has replaced historic ties with the Chilean and, most recently, Israeli militaries. The Minister of Defense has traditionally been chosen from among top Army officers. Through its Chief of the Armed Forces General Staff, the Army has operational control over all other military and paramilitary components. The Army is organized into six military zones and subdivided into 14 departmental commands plus a number of functional commands. It has borne the brunt of the counterinsurgent struggle.

**Air Force.** The Salvadoran Air Force has improved its reputation in recent years as US training and equipment facilitate a wider role in support of ground operations. Although still constrained by too few pilots for its 85 operational aircraft, overall Air Force size has tripled since 1979 to 500 personnel. All operations stage out of Ilopango Air Base near the capital, although helicopters are sometimes detached to field commanders for temporary duty.

**Navy.** Although it has grown more than sixfold since 1979, the 500-man Salvadoran Navy remains the weakest service branch. Operationally headquartered at the port of La Union in the Gulf of Fonseca, and with fewer than 30 boats, the Navy still cannot adequately patrol the coastline or support the Army through blocking actions or interdiction.

forces relied on fixed rather than mobile communications networks. Under the peacetime logistics system, garrisons bought food and fuel through local commercial channels but depended entirely on depots in the capital for weapons and ammunition supplies and equipment maintenance.

**Public Security Forces (11,500)**

**National Guard.** The Salvadoran National Guard was created in 1912 and modeled after the Spanish Civil Guard; it functions mainly as a rural police force throughout the country. The Guard has been traditionally better paid, better trained, and with more experience than Army recruits, but it is not benefiting directly from US training and new equipment which goes exclusively to the regular forces. The Guard is administered from San Salvador and divided into five regional commands; its 4,200 members provide the first line of defense in many outlying towns and actively participate in counterinsurgent actions technically under the operational control of the local Army commander.

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**National Police.** The National Police was formed in 1945 as the urban counterpart to the National Guard. Its 5,500 personnel take action against terrorists, but still spend most of their time on routine police matters. Reforms in recent years have increased police professionalism, but lack of officers has forced a reduction to only three command centers throughout the country.

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**Treasury Police.** The small size of the 1,800-man Treasury Police, which was organized in 1926, belies its reputation as the most aggressive of the public security forces and the worst abuser of human rights. Dispersed into five operational zones, Treasury personnel [redacted] participate on occasion in military actions under Army direction.

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The growth of the armed insurgency in 1979-80<sup>3</sup> forced the government to reassess its military preparedness. The junta increased the defense budget,

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began to expand the size of the armed forces, converted some military school staffs into combat units, accelerated the graduation of officers from the academy, improved relations with neighboring countries to try to stem the flow of arms reaching the insurgents, and solicited US aid. The mobilization of existing resources allowed government forces to weather numerous attacks—including a countrywide guerrilla campaign in January 1981—but left the Army on the defensive. By the end of 1981, the need for additional resources became increasingly apparent. [redacted]

#### Battlefield Performance to Date

The mediocre performance of government forces in 1981 plus new developments in early 1982—the destruction of much of the Air Force during a January raid and the heavy security requirements for the March Constituent Assembly elections—led to urgent requests for increased United States assistance. To improve battlefield performance, the United States sharply increased military aid for programs to upgrade the size, training, equipment, support systems, intelligence capability, and combat planning of the Salvadoran forces.<sup>4</sup> [redacted]

**Force Development.** In a number of areas El Salvador has made progress toward retooling its armed forces for a counterinsurgent war:

- Troop strength has more than tripled since 1979 to almost 40,000, with five immediate-reaction (IR) battalions created to respond and reinforce when local forces engage the enemy. These units, as well as the airborne battalion, form a strategic reserve that generally has enabled the government to focus deployments against guerrilla concentrations without leaving less contested areas of the country unprotected. Local forces have been expanded—and are being reorganized—in an effort to strengthen the defense of important installations, while simultaneously making more troops available for aggressive patrolling and offensive operations.
- Almost 14,000 Salvadorans have received some US military training, although only about 50 percent are still on active duty. More than 150 US training

<sup>4</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the problems and progress of the Salvadoran military over the past two years, see the appendix to this paper, "Development of a Counterinsurgency Force." [redacted]

teams have rotated to El Salvador to provide instruction in command and control, small-unit tactics, combat medical care, logistics, naval and air skills, communications, and equipment maintenance. Salvadoran units have trained at Fort Bragg and at the Regional Military Training Center in Honduras, while individual soldiers have been sent to US facilities in Panama to acquire specialized skills.

- The addition of almost 900 US-trained junior officers has plugged critical gaps in lower level leadership and is enabling the Army gradually to move toward leader-intensive small-unit tactics. The government also has moved a few combat-proven mid-level officers to key command positions to take advantage of their experience.
- Recent personnel shifts at the top have fostered better communications between the General Staff and field units. The outstanding reputation of the new leadership team among combat commanders is bringing some improvement in command authority. Procedural changes have included 24-hour staffing of the national operations center; formal investigation of combat losses; the increased incorporation of air force, artillery, and naval personnel into the planning process; and more regular liaison with US advisers.

- The simultaneous realignment of military zones to coincide with enemy fronts reduced the guerrillas' opportunities for slipping through corridors between operational commands. It also has encouraged the brigades to function as links between battalions and the High Command.
- Modern infantry weapons and communications gear of US manufacture have begun to be standardized throughout regular units. New equipment could be introduced rapidly because weapons have not been technically complex and training packages have accompanied procurement. The acquisition of new

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aircraft has drawn the Air Force more fully into the counterinsurgent struggle, and the Navy has begun to increase its patrolling to try to discourage enemy resupply by sea.

- In cooperation with the United States, new efforts at strategic planning have given the Salvadorans a framework for concentrating limited resources in key areas, integrating civic action with the military effort, and developing civil defense forces to enhance local security.
- Improved tactical planning and the restructuring of local forces into light battalions is encouraging more aggressive small-unit operations. The reorganization is shaking the lethargy out of some garrison units and providing commanders with a potentially more flexible structure to anticipate or respond to guerrilla actions.
- Technical intelligence collection has increased dramatically as a result of substantial US assistance. Salvadoran observer aircraft have improved the military's visual reconnaissance capability, while

Elite US-trained long-range reconnaissance patrols have undertaken productive missions into enemy-controlled territory. The armed forces' ability to use intelligence is growing as a result of expanded staffing both at the High Command and in field units. Modifications in all-source tactical operational planning packages from Washington are improving their usefulness for Salvadoran commanders.

**Combat Record.** The considerable progress of El Salvador's armed forces in attaining their manpower, equipment, and training goals has not been matched by their overall effectiveness on the battlefield, however. Despite gradual improvement in combat performance—visible, for example, during the spring 1984 election period—government campaigns over the past two years have not reduced the total area under guerrilla domination, although they have caused relocation of a number of insurgent camps. National Guard troops have been pulled back from numerous outposts, leaving more villages without a regular government presence than two years ago.

Furthermore, the government's past piecemeal approach to operations had little effect on the overall level of enemy hostile activities, according to attache reporting.

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Wide tactical swings in the Salvadoran war have tended to obscure the overall strategic trend (see diagram). The combat initiative has shifted back and forth with neither side able to achieve a decisive breakthrough. During implementation of the National Plan in summer 1983, for example, government forces—on the offensive in nine out of 14 departments—forced the guerrillas to pull back and regroup. After a series of successful guerrilla counterattacks during the fall, however, the insurgents capped off the year by overrunning, for the first time, a major Army garrison and destroying the remaining highway bridge over the Lempa River. The military, however, has shown an ability to address some of its shortcomings. Most recently, aggressive offensive actions contributed to the guerrillas' inability to disrupt either round of the presidential election.

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In our view, lack of greater government gains on the battlefield can be explained in part by improvements in the enemy's combat capability. The Intelligence Community believes that the overall size of the guerrilla movement has remained about the same over the past two years but that guerrilla combat strength has now reached 9,000 to 11,000 because of the upgrading of militia forces through training, experience, and the acquisition of weapons.<sup>5</sup> Tactical coordination between guerrilla factions has also improved somewhat. Furthermore, insurgent forces have shown increasing sophistication in tactical planning and the use of intelligence and can now stage well-executed conventional attacks—often at night—against company-sized or even larger units.

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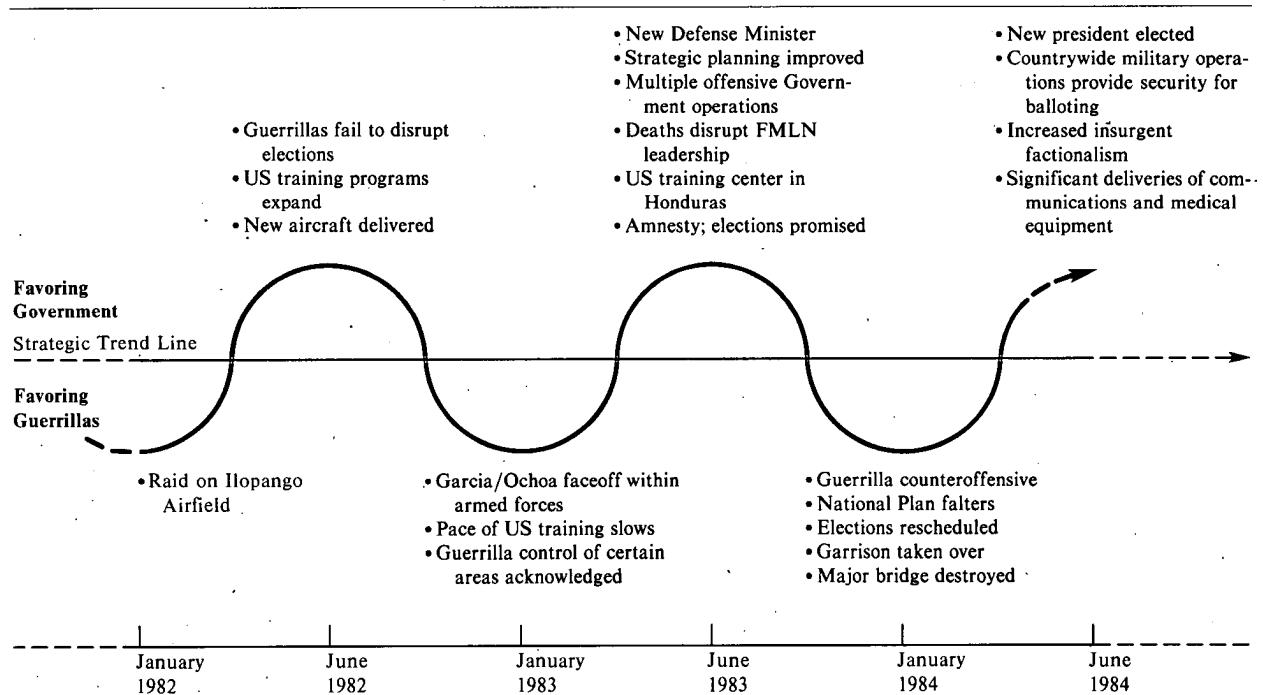
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**Figure 2**  
**Fluctuations in the Salvadoran Conflict, January 1982-June 1984**



Note: This chart is designed to represent the relationship between individual events in El Salvador and the overall course of the war. Although certain tactical actions may appear to tip the struggle in favor of the government or the guerrillas at any one time, events have tended to even out over the long term, leaving the battlefield situation stalemated. The specific developments cited in this graph were chosen to illustrate the cyclical pattern and are not meant to be a weighted listing of all relevant factors on the Salvadoran scene.

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Many of El Salvador's military improvement programs are still under way, thus delaying an assessment of their ultimate battlefield impact. Nonetheless, it is already clear that training and funding bottlenecks have slowed efforts to expand total forces and restructure individual units. Understandably, some disorganization and lack of understanding of new missions and tactics have dogged the government effort during the transition, according to attache reporting. Furthermore, standardization into 350-man light battalions has now been scrapped in favor of somewhat larger units with heavier weapons support.

The new structures will strain equipment and personnel resources over the short term, but may lead to greater battlefield flexibility in time.

The funding shortfalls during the early stages of the war also weakened combat support and prevented the development of peripheral programs needed to sustain combat gains. Lack of a major program to upgrade mobility, we believe, has reduced potential gains from the improvements in the size, organization, and tactical training of the ground forces. The scramble for

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resources has exacerbated rivalries between the services at a time when cooperation is deemed vital and contributed to the reluctance of the logistics command to distribute supplies to the field. Lack of funds has also prevented commanders from cultivating local informants, thus handicapping operations by poor tactical intelligence. Programs to encourage reenlistment through incentive pay, to reward defectors, to improve the military's image through civic action, and to develop civil defense units to maintain security once government forces have retaken rural areas have languished because of the fiscal squeeze. [redacted]

Reflecting chronic budget shortfalls despite US aid, the Salvadoran Government has had to spend a large proportion of available defense funds on consumables to keep the day-to-day war going rather than on investments for long-term force improvement. US ammunition deliveries are critical to keeping Salvadoran forces in the field. Defense Minister Vides acknowledged El Salvador's dependence in this area when he told a visiting US Senator that troops could not fight three months without US munitions support, according to a US attache present. With no military industries and no alternative foreign sources of supply, the government has had to use about 30 percent of US military aid in recent years for ordnance to keep the war going. [redacted]

Even so, ammunition shortages affecting the level of combat have occurred from time to time. [redacted] shortages have occurred because of aid ceilings, the difficulty of ordering in advance and stockpiling under the irregular appropriations timetable, and fluctuations in Salvadoran tactical activity and fire discipline that have made forecasting difficult. El Salvador required an emergency shipment of 5.56-mm ammunition at the end of 1983, for example, after the government's summer offensive and the fall guerrilla resurgence depleted stocks more rapidly than expected. Even when stocks are on hand, worry about future availability—especially during US Congressional debates over aid legislation—has caused Salvadoran commanders to hoard supplies and reduce operations, according to the US Embassy. The growing need for spare parts as new equipment ages has also begun to increase the pressure to use more aid funds for short-term expendables. [redacted]

Institutional rigidity and leadership resistance to change, in our view, also have considerably weakened the envisioned payoffs from programs set in place. In each case, areas of gain have been undercut by areas of continuing weakness:

- The government has expanded the armed forces, but lost the benefit of much training and combat experience through short enlistment tours and poor reenlistment rates.
- Training in counterguerrilla tactics has been instituted, but officers have not always trained with their troops, units have been pulled from training for operations, and Salvadoran training programs have been slow to supplement US efforts.
- The number of inexperienced junior officers has ballooned, but the High Command has not effectively moved to increase critical middle ranks through merit promotions or endorsed the development of an NCO corps.
- US equipment and supplies have arrived, but inefficient distribution and requisition procedures often have prevented items from getting to where they are most needed on a timely basis. Furthermore, domestically produced items have often been in critically short supply.

- The government has undertaken to reorganize local forces into smaller battalions without the units themselves embracing the appropriate tactics in most cases.
- Army zones have been redrawn to match combat realities, but public security forces, which constitute more than one-fourth of the Salvadoran defense establishment and play a significant combat role, have not reorganized along parallel lines.
- Strategic plans have been formulated, but weak command authority has handicapped implementation.

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- Far more technical intelligence has been collected by the United States than the Salvadoran armed forces can react to, and Salvadoran collection efforts of all types have improved only slowly.
- Defense Minister Vides has encouraged more professional attention to the war, but the top leadership has remained vulnerable to political pressure from both within and outside the military.

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### Performance Outlook

Salvadoran and US planners forecast continued force improvements in 1984. According to attache reporting, the Salvadoran Government expects to add at least 6,000 troops, set up one more IR battalion, and finish the consolidation of local forces into light battalions. Another large class of junior officers is expected to graduate. US training teams in El Salvador and programs outside the country will provide the bulk of combat preparation for Salvadoran forces, although government training efforts are likely to increase somewhat utilizing the training center in La Union. According to a US attache report, service tours might be extended beyond two years in 1984 as draft laws are revised following approval of the new Salvadoran Constitution. Much of the current military aid appropriation is likely to be spent on ammunition, according to military assistance personnel, although orders for communications gear, artillery, and trucks have been processed. Plans to upgrade tactical intelligence and further improve medical care are also under consideration.

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In our view, weaknesses in the Salvadoran system—as well as enemy strengths—are likely to continue to reduce the potential impact of force improvements, however. On the basis of performance to date, we expect leadership attitudes to continue to evolve during the coming year, but only slowly and unevenly. The strengthening of the command and control apparatus now under way is likely to contribute gradually to more efficient resource management and raise officer morale. We expect expanded military staffs at all levels to become increasingly familiar with the use of tactical intelligence, although El Salvador will continue to rely heavily on the United States for intelligence collection and evaluation.

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Manpower expansion and the establishment of new units will improve the combat potential of the armed forces by providing additional troops for offensive operations, beyond static defense requirements. We believe, however, that the needs of the new troops will continue to strain available training programs, resulting in the fielding of units poorly prepared for combat, a substantial casualty rate, and further loss of weapons and supplies to the enemy. Because of economic constraints, operational priorities, and national sensitivities, San Salvador,

may also cut back on its use of the Regional Military Training Center in Honduras in 1984. The next influx of junior officers will provide expanded lower echelon leadership, encouraging small-unit operations, but persistent officer shortages at company and field grade levels will weaken management of the expanded force.

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Furthermore, even if forces grow at projected rates, the size of the military is not expected to dramatically outstrip the size of opposing forces. So far, the Salvadoran military with its ratio of only 4:1 has done well to hold its own in the field considering the very heavy manpower commitments that are required in counterinsurgent struggles to search out an elusive enemy. Government forces have benefited somewhat from force multipliers—such as better mobility and firepower than guerrilla forces—to achieve some successes beyond what their numbers alone would provide.

Assuming no dramatic change in insurgent capabilities, improvements in mobility and weaponry during the coming year will strengthen the government's ability to maintain military pressure on the insurgents. The armed forces will be able to make immediate use of the trucks on order and could benefit from some additional helicopters of types already in use. However, any potential offer of large numbers of helicopters, even if they are of a type already in the Salvadoran inventory, or of additional items, such as C-47s converted to gunships or Chinook heavy-lift helicopters, would face absorption problems, we judge. The substantial leadtimes for pilot, crew, and

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mechanic training and the development of tactical expertise would limit battlefield impact during 1984, in our view, if the systems were to be Salvadoran manned.

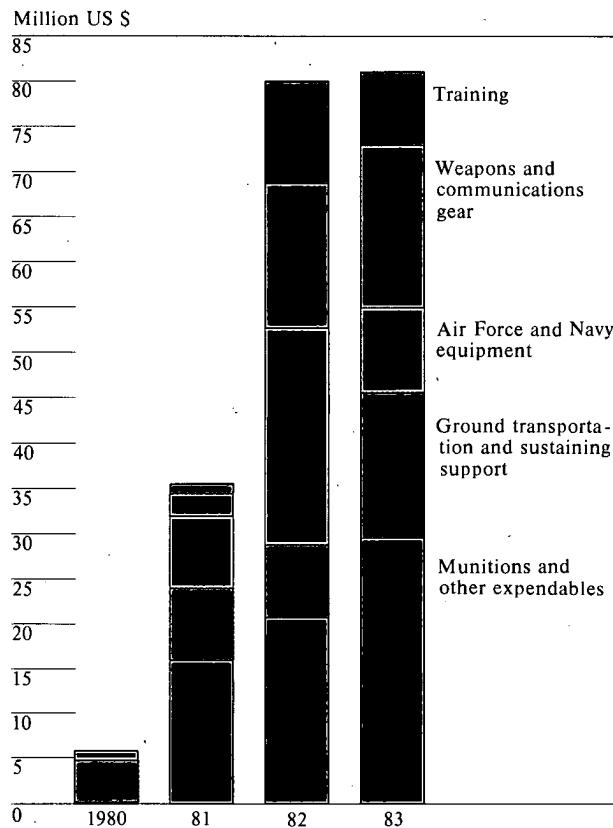
The Salvadoran Government is trying to keep force expansion plans in line with anticipated revenues, but overall military development, we judge, is likely to continue to suffer from serious budget constraints which limit supporting services. We expect financial pressures to grow as the war intensifies, the payroll increases, loans come due, and medical and death benefits burgeon. Foreign economic aid will probably continue to relieve some of El Salvador's fiscal pressures, and military aid may contribute hardware and training. Nevertheless, domestic revenues are unlikely to increase substantially, and we see few encouraging signs that the reluctant Salvadoran private sector is increasing its support for the military effort.

Political factors may hold the key to the strategic balance over the short term. The actions of the new Duarte government will influence not only the level of US aid but also the amount of attention Salvadoran defense leaders will focus on the war effort. Continued signs that the military is comfortable in its new relationship with civilian authority would permit the High Command to concentrate more fully on prosecution of the war. In that event, the armed forces might be able to hold their own for several years, providing both the time and the incentive for force improvement programs to take root and for leadership attitudes to adjust to counterinsurgent realities. On the other hand, if top defense leaders were to become preoccupied with political events in San Salvador for an extended period of time, their inability to direct and coordinate combat actions would weaken the impact of both force improvement efforts and any tactical successes by local commanders.

#### Implications for the United States

El Salvador's reliance on the United States for support in its military struggle against the insurgency has grown dramatically over the past few years (see figure 3). By 1983, US military aid provided one-third of all Salvadoran defense outlays. As the sole supplier of ammunition—and with budget constraints preventing El Salvador from either stockpiling or diversifying through commercial channels—US actions exert considerable influence over the government's ability to

**Figure 3**  
**Growth of US Military Assistance to El Salvador, 1980-83**



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keep troops in the field. Furthermore, El Salvador receives a substantial portion of its military intelligence, strategic and tactical advice, counterinsurgency training, and general military supplies from US sources. The Salvadorans' anxiety about the fragility of this relationship has caused a decrease in combat operations during US Congressional aid debates.

Concern about a potential aid cutoff strongly influences the political, as well as military, decision making of the Salvadoran defense leadership.

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Although US influence has increased, the application of leverage to accelerate armed force development is limited by a number of factors inherent in the Salvadoran system. First, the quick fixes, such as reequipping the Salvadoran Army and training elite units to form a strategic reaction force, are already largely accomplished. The areas that still require considerable change to meet the guerrilla threat, such as leadership attitudes and institutional procedures, are those aspects that have shown little development until recently. Progress in the future, therefore, is likely to be both slower and less quantifiable, with accompanying difficulties of evaluating and readjusting programs on a timely basis.

Historically slow patterns of institutional change are complicated at times by resistance to US influence. The Salvadoran military leadership has tried to hold the United States at arm's length during the past several years, resisting, for example, for more than six months US importuning to replace ad hoc military actions with a comprehensive strategy for winning the war. Top leaders similarly avoided taking a public stand on human rights abuses until Vice President Bush's visit in December 1983 made it impossible to ignore the issue. As US efforts begin to concentrate more on remolding the character of the military system rather than technical modernization of the armed forces, we believe Salvadoran national sensitivities are likely to be increasingly irritated. Moreover, in our view, the end product inevitably will be a hybrid approach to the counterinsurgent struggle: a modification of the US tactical model, toward larger somewhat less mobile units, to fit the Salvadoran outlook.

Increasingly strong foreign pressures for change, when added to the considerable domestic tensions from open warfare and political instability, run the danger of further skewing the pattern of Salvadoran military development. Over the past few years, sectors of the military system and individual leaders able to adapt quickly to the counterinsurgent threat have performed dramatically on the battlefield, while those less able to adapt have lagged. This disparity in rates of progress has tended to undercut the impact of the many improvements made. According to attache reporting, commanders willing to employ US-inspired small-scale aggressive patrols at night, for example,

have found it difficult to coordinate operations with nearby forces reluctant to move out of garrisons in less than company-size units even in daytime. If an idea surfaced to turn the IR battalions into advanced air assault units, for example, such a move would not reap maximum benefit if elite units were unable to mesh their actions with local forces in the area of operation.

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We believe that US pressure to accelerate force development can, if not carefully orchestrated, strain El Salvador's capacity to absorb both technology and force-management ideas, and nurture a counterproductive dependence on the United States. It is widely acknowledged by US observers that the Salvadoran military already has not been able to make optimum use of the voluminous technical intelligence made available over the past two years. Use of secure communications systems has similarly been shackled by the low level of technical expertise and lack of security consciousness among Salvadoran troops. Given present limits on US advisory presence, we judge that the Salvadorans would have considerable difficulty in making use of greatly expanded or more sophisticated assistance than they have received in recent years. Moreover, any significant increase in US advisory presence could leave officers with a feeling they were not in control of their own military situation and weaken the resolve of the armed forces High Command.

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These problems suggest that Salvadoran military leaders will be capable of only incremental progress and partial success in molding the armed forces into a more effective counterinsurgency force. Emergence of a tough, independently capable modern military is, in our view, many years away. Efforts to push force development even more rapidly than presently planned could prove counterproductive, undermining the traditional military system before new approaches can become accepted and take root. By the same token, sustaining at least presently planned US support is essential to El Salvador's holding the insurgents at bay until political, economic, and social changes can better contribute to turning the tide.

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## Appendix

### Development of a Counterinsurgency Force

The mediocre performance of government forces in 1981 plus new developments in early 1982—the destruction of much of the Air Force during a January raid and the heavy security requirements for the March Constituent Assembly elections—led to requests for substantially increased US assistance. To improve battlefield performance, programs were undertaken to substantially upgrade the size, training, equipment, support systems, intelligence capability, and combat planning of the Salvadoran forces.

#### Force Size

Since 1979, El Salvador has more than tripled its armed forces—that is, the military services and public security forces—to 39,800, adding strategic reserve units to respond and reinforce when local forces engage the enemy (see table 1). New resources have gone into creating five 1,000-man Immediate Reaction Units: the Atlacatl, Beloso, Atonal, Arce, and Bracamonte Battalions. Airborne, long-range reconnaissance and naval commando units also have been added. Although a large proportion of the augmented force is still being used for static defense, we judge that more than 15,000 additional troops should be available for offensive operations.

**Recruitment.** The government appears to have had little trouble finding recruits to meet manpower goals to date. Because El Salvador is the most densely populated country in Central America and because the current economic downturn has swollen the ranks of the unemployed, sufficient youths have usually registered with local garrisons to meet the thrice-yearly induction quotas. According to the Constitution, a military tour is compulsory for all men from 18 to 30 years old. In practice, however, according to attache reporting, deferrals for students and corruption in the system have spared sons of the middle and upper classes from serving, contributing to rumblings of discontent about the inequitable burden of the war. There have been [redacted] roundups and forced conscription, most recently in the northeast, but we do not believe such abuses are widespread.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Each of the 14 departmental commanders in El Salvador uses his own system to keep personnel records, making countrywide analysis difficult.

El Salvador's manpower needs are relatively high each year not only because of force expansion, but also because of rapid turnover among enlisted personnel. According to a variety of Defense Department sources, as a result of the government's political reluctance to declare national mobilization and arbitrarily extend all military tours, the majority of recruits still leave the regular Army after only two years, although some then join public security units.<sup>7</sup> A program of salary incentives announced in March 1983 has encouraged some senior enlisted personnel to stay on, according to attache reports, but the funds have not stretched far enough to benefit most first timers. In the absence of a strong national incentive program, reenlistment varies greatly depending on unit leadership and morale. The US defense attache reports, for example, that the Beloso Battalion was able to sign up 60 percent of its troops for another tour, while nearby units in San Vicente retained only a handful of eligibles. A high casualty rate also contributes to recruitment pressures (see table 4).

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**Effects of Buildup.** So far, military force expansion has not had a commensurate effect on the conduct of the counterinsurgency, in part because the number of armed guerrillas has also risen in recent years so that the government manpower advantage actually decreased from 5:1 in 1981 to 4:1 in 1983.<sup>8</sup> Although the expanded size of the force permits the government to conduct large operations in several areas simultaneously, the guerrillas' ability to strike throughout the country on their own timetable often has kept the armed forces off balance. Due to insufficient mobility, strategic reserve units have not always been able to react on short notice. Although definite improvement has occurred in recent months, in our view, maximum use is still not being made of local troops, in large part

<sup>7</sup> As a result of US pressure, service obligations were modestly increased to two years in early 1983.

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**Table 1**  
**El Salvador: Force Expansion**

	Military Services				Public Security Forces				Defense Establishment Total
	Army	Navy	Air Force	Subtotal	National Guard	National Police	Treasury Police	Subtotal	
Mid-1979	7,126	80	154	7,360	2,750	1,500	1,100	5,350	12,710
Mid-1981	9,170	351	178	9,699	3,462	2,833	1,320	7,615	17,314
Mid-1983	22,456	385	436	23,277	3,392	3,584	1,786	8,762	32,039
January 1984	27,300	500	500	28,300	4,200	5,500	1,800	11,500	39,800

because the reorientation of Salvadoran military thinking from traditional static defense concepts to mobile offensive warfare is taking longer than efforts to restructure the Army into smaller combat units.

Growth of the armed forces has also proceeded faster than the development of supporting services. The government has found it more difficult to come up with housing, food, pay, and personal equipment for the rapidly expanding force than to sign up recruits. Such support costs have placed an enormous burden on already strained government resources. US military advisers, for example, report that the Salvadoran Government encountered serious difficulties meeting its 1983 military payroll. Foreign economic aid has relieved some of El Salvador's fiscal pressures and military aid can provide hardware and training, but the United States is legally prevented from offering direct budget support.

#### Troop Quality

**US Training Program.** The Salvadoran Army, Air Force, and Navy have received substantial training assistance, mainly from the United States, in recent years. At the outset, the United States faced the daunting task of converting El Salvador's standing conventional army, with little field experience, into an active counterinsurgency force. Force expansion, rapid turnover in personnel, and the fielding of new equipment systems subsequently added to training

requirements. Despite limited funds and rigid personnel quotas, US trainers had taught critical skills to about 14,000 officers and troops by early 1984 (see tables 2 and 3). US efforts were supplemented by a 15-man Venezuelan team that trained two light battalions in 1982 and by others, such as Argentina, that offered special courses in their own countries to small groups.

In specific areas, enhanced training has made a dramatic improvement in the capabilities of the Salvadoran armed forces. The IR battalions and the reconnaissance teams trained in Panama have earned considerable respect from the guerrillas.

Upgrading of the Air Force has also brought that service fully into the counterinsurgency effort. On the other hand, the performance of some of the light battalions, even those trained by the United States, has been disappointing, often as a result of weak leadership and the low level of skills acquired during training.<sup>9</sup>

The overall impact of US training is limited, having reached only about 25 percent of the standing force. Of the approximately 14,000 US-trained personnel, we estimate that only 7,000—out of a total Army,

<sup>9</sup> In an effort to correct these weaknesses, training for the light battalions was increased from five to eight weeks in early 1984.

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**Table 2**  
**US Training Programs in El Salvador**

	1981	1982	1983
Number of training teams	23	63	94
Focus of activity	Command and control	Command and control	Command and control
Intelligence	Small-unit tactics	Battalion upgrade	
Small-unit tactics	Logistics	Logistics	
Aircraft and small boat maintenance	Pilot standardization	Humanitarian/medical training	
Combat support	Aircraft maintenance	Naval training	

Navy, and Air Force strength of 28,300—are still on active duty,<sup>10</sup> although some have joined public security units after release. In addition, individuals who receive technical training often have rejoined units unable or disinclined to take advantage of the new skills. Even units that train together spend only a relatively short period under US supervision, not enough time to guarantee results. Furthermore, the public security forces, which constitute more than one-fourth of the Salvadoran defense establishment and play a significant combat role, receive no assistance because of US aid restrictions.

**Salvadoran Training Role.** Salvadoran leaders have not always been fully supportive of US training programs. The High Command has pulled units out of training for combat operations, [redacted] and is unenthusiastic about out-of-country programs because of their high price and inconvenience, despite the advantages of uninterrupted training. US trainers also report only slow progress in getting leaders to train alongside their troops; in some cases officer reluctance has reflected sensitivity over

<sup>10</sup> These figures are based on the best estimate of military assistance personnel in 1983 that 50 percent of US-trained troops remained on active duty.

**Table 3**  
**Number of Salvadorans Trained by the United States <sup>a</sup>**

	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984 <sup>b</sup>
Subtotal	0	208	1,480	5,789	6,439	8,369
El Salvador	0	NA <sup>c</sup>	1,274	3,752	3,235	4,000
In Panama	0	208	195	598	1,141	1,774
In Honduras	0	0	0	0	1,550	2,550
In United States	0	NA <sup>d</sup>	11	1,439	513	45

**Total 1979-83: 13,916**

<sup>a</sup> Although these figures are the best estimates [redacted] they should be used only as a general guideline. A lack of comprehensive recordkeeping, the wide geographic distribution of training sites, and possible double-counting prevent completely accurate accounting.

<sup>b</sup> Proposed training.

<sup>c</sup> No figures are available on the number trained. Since only two survey teams and three small training teams deployed in 1980, it can be assumed that the number was quite small.

<sup>d</sup> Data not available.

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accepting training from US noncommissioned personnel. In addition, some courses have been shortened because of training backlogs and operational needs. The Arce IR battalion, for example, received only six weeks of training in mid-1983—in contrast to the Belloso's scheduled 18 weeks in mid-1982—in order to have it return from Honduras in time for the then expected fall elections.

Salvadoran training efforts, moreover, have not complemented US programs. The government has dragged its feet, in our view, on the steps needed to reestablish a comprehensive national training system after the original training structure was dismantled to provide additional combat personnel. Some military schools, such as the Command and General Staff School and the Aviation School, have reappeared, but primarily due to US prodding. According to US military sources, Army basic training largely remains decentralized at the department level, where, depending on the approach of the local commander, recruits

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sometimes receive only a few weeks of on-the-job training before being sent into combat. US teams, expecting to upgrade experienced units, often end up providing basic weapons familiarization and drill instruction to novices.

Government promises to establish a national military training center are only now yielding results. At the end of 1983, the Minister of Defense began to staff a training center at a facility used by US advisers in La Union. It has initially focused on refresher courses for units as well as some basic training for recruits, but it will be some time before the center is operating fully. Salvadoran trainers work alongside most US teams, and the military has shown some initiative in fielding two of its own mobile training teams to help with the conversion of local units to light battalions, but the overall Salvadoran training program is small and poorly organized.

**Loyalty and Morale.** Overall armed forces loyalty is not seriously in question and the government continues to be able to put soldiers in the field. Few troops have gone over to the enemy and some units have shown outstanding professionalism and bravery. Desertion rates ran 1 to 2 percent in the second quarter of 1983, which is not considered unusual under combat conditions, according to attache reporting. Although losses from ordinary units are probably greater than from IR battalions, desertion does not appear to be a real problem. So far, troop dissatisfaction remains a local issue, we judge, rather than one of national dimension.

some troops fleeing in disorder, surrendering easily, changing to civilian clothes to escape detection, exaggerating the size of opposing forces to avoid follow-on operations, and refusing to go into battle until conditions—including leadership changes—are met. The US defense attache has reported that two companies were ejected from the service for insubordination in Morazan in early 1983 and that the Pipil Battalion was returned to garrison for poor discipline in September. Slackness and lack of training also contributed to military disasters at the El Paraiso garrison and the Cuscatlan Bridge in late December 1983.

a Salvadoran

"troop motivation unit" is constantly on the road preparing recruits for combat and remedying cases of poor morale.

Table 4  
Armed Forces Casualties <sup>a</sup>

	1981	1982	1983
Casualties (killed and wounded)	3,000	3,500	3,200
Military strength (midyear)	17,314	28,350	32,039
Percent of forces killed or wounded	17	12	10

<sup>a</sup> We have used Salvadoran Government casualty statistics for the sake of continuity, and have rounded them to indicate the general lack of precision in casualty reporting from El Salvador. We believe, however, that these figures underestimate actual casualties so that an even greater percentage of the standing force is probably lost each year than the table indicates. At the other end of the spectrum, the insurgents claim to have inflicted 6,785 casualties during 1983 and captured almost 2,000 in addition.

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**Casualties.** A consistently high casualty rate among government forces has affected troop morale in some cases, although the availability of replacements has minimized the impact of losses forcewide. The government has suffered heavy casualties each year, with about three-fourths of these losses occurring in the regular forces and the remainder in public security units (see table 4).

Government losses remain striking, despite the declining proportion of forces affected. Casualties remove a much larger proportion of troops each year than would be considered acceptable by Western military strategists. Such high losses result from the large number of raw recruits in combat and the dismal state of medical care. According to a US medical team's evaluation in 1983, one-third of all wounded soldiers eventually died—in comparison to one in 10 for the United States in Vietnam—because of poor field attention and inadequate medical transportation. US success in training several hundred medics was not accompanied by increased helicopter and ambulance medevac support until mid-1984. Furthermore, many Salvadoran officers continue to consider medics as infantry troops first, and limit the medical supplies a medic can carry.

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**Leadership**

**Size and Distribution of Officer Corps.** The Salvadoran officer corps was caught short at the onset of hostilities but has grown rapidly in its effort to match force expansion and meet the leadership demands of small-unit counterinsurgency warfare. Because of the urgency of the war, El Salvador graduated early a relatively large military academy class of 85 cadets in August 1981, enrolled an unprecedented class of 450 cadets in October 1981, and commissioned the next senior class two and a half years early in February 1982. Two groups of about 450 officer candidates each underwent two to four months of intensive training at Fort Benning, in spring 1982 and mid-1983, receiving a rank of cadet, below that of second lieutenant, upon completion. Owing to these programs, more junior officers entered the Salvadoran armed forces from 1980 to the end of 1983 than had previously graduated from the military academy since its founding in the 1930s, according to attache reporting.

Despite some growing pains, including initial reluctance of senior officers to entrust raw cadets with combat responsibilities and a high attrition rate among new officers,<sup>11</sup> US military observers consider that the critical shortages at the junior ranks have now been eased.

The infusion of junior officers, however, was not accompanied by increases in experienced officers at the field and company grade level. Reformist elements in the junta forced the retirement of some senior officers in 1979, and a knowledgeable US military observer estimated in late 1983 that the Salvadoran armed forces were still short at least 50 majors and 250 captains. Few units have full complements of officers.

Despite considerable US pressure, the High Command has resisted filling out middle and upper ranks through accelerated promotions. The traditional peacetime promotion policy based on time in grade and schooling has not given way to a wartime system

<sup>11</sup> In late 1983

25 percent of the first Fort Benning class was no longer on active duty, although only 4 percent of the second class had left the service.

**Table 5**  
**Size and Distribution  
of the Officer Corps**

	1978 <sup>a</sup>	1983 <sup>b</sup>
<b>Total</b>	<b>561</b>	<b>1,697</b>
Generals	6	3
Colonels	99	81
Lieutenant colonels	58	82
Majors	56	84
Captains	113	53
1st lieutenants	104	153
2nd lieutenants	125	502
Cadets	0	739

<sup>a</sup> Considered representative of the traditional officer structure.

<sup>b</sup> Yearend figures.

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based on combat performance, despite the Minister of Defense's acknowledgment of the need for change and the availability of several outstanding candidates. The recent accessions of a combat-seasoned major to acting command of the Atlacatl Battalion and a lieutenant colonel to a full brigade/zone command, however, suggest that some evolution may be occurring in the system, although neither has been promoted to the rank commensurate with his new command.

The military also is reluctant to move seasoned enlisted personnel into leadership positions, reflecting a strong cultural bias. The existing noncommissioned officers' course has been upgraded to include six weeks of US training in Panama, but still turns out only about 30 NCOs twice a year. Even though the United States put Salvadoran NCOs in charge of the new, highly trained, long-range reconnaissance patrols, this practice was not adopted elsewhere in the Salvadoran forces. In early 1984, a large group of sergeants received lieutenant's bars, but it is too soon to tell how efficiently they will be used.

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**Readiness.** Problems of absentee leadership and lax prosecution of the war have not afflicted the best units but are all too characteristic of the many units whose leaders have not yet received US training or have not taken the teachings to heart. Acknowledging the poor state of readiness, Defense Minister Vides issued new standing orders in September 1983. [redacted]

[redacted] specifying that a commanding officer or deputy be on duty at all times, 75 percent of each unit be kept on alert, operations be conducted around the clock with emphasis on night-time patrolling, and detailed monthly reports be submitted to show compliance. Despite the efforts of top leadership, many units continued to ignore regulations, [redacted]

The reassignment in early 1984 of a few commanders whose units were caught unaware by the enemy is providing some previous lacking incentive to improve readiness, but punishments for officers remain mild. [redacted]

**Command Changes.** The Salvadoran High Command is paying greater attention to the war effort than two years ago. The January 1983 mutiny of Lieutenant Colonel Ochoa in Cabanas Department brought officer dissatisfaction with the management of the war to a head and eventually forced the resignation of Defense Minister Garcia. His replacement, General Vides, assumed a more active personal role in the conduct of the war, visited units in the field, tried to promote aggressive small-unit tactics, and began to implement a new "national strategy" for defeating the guerrillas. [redacted]

The Defense Minister moved more cautiously in making critically needed personnel changes, however. Anxious to avoid political fallout that might jeopardize his own position, factionalize the military, or endanger continued US aid, Vides followed tradition and established a commission in October to thresh out military problems. By November, battlefield reverses throughout the country, increasing consensus within the military, and strong pressure from the United States finally propelled him into announcing major leadership changes. [redacted]

The breakup provided a dramatic opportunity to strengthen the traditionally unresponsive General Staff. Defense Minister Vides brought in the First Brigade commander Colonel Blandon as Chief of

Staff and Lieutenant Colonel Mendez from the Beloso Battalion as Chief of Operations and shifted 80 percent of staff personnel, according to US attache reporting. The outstanding reputation of this new team among combat commanders presaged an increase in the command and control authority exercised by the General Staff. Early changes included round-the-clock staffing, formal investigation of recent combat losses, the addition of Air Force and artillery representatives to planning sessions, and more cordial liaison with US advisers. Nonetheless, reining in traditionally independent local commanders and setting priorities for operational support on a countrywide basis will not be accomplished quickly. [redacted]

Vides's moves were also designed, we believe, to revitalize battlefield performance. He changed commanders of at least 10 major combat units—including three of the four US-trained IR battalions—removing some deadwood, relieving several battle-weary commanders, putting a top officer in charge of the beleaguered easternmost departments, and exposing a new group of officers to more senior posts. Although the new lineup represented the first command shifts in a long time for most of the units, the changes set back operations for only a short time while the new officers settled in. In a followup move at the end of 1983, the corrupt commander of the Navy was finally ousted. [redacted]

**Reputation.** Even so, the military is making only slow progress in improving its dismal public image, although human rights abuses appear to be declining, according to the US Embassy. US investigators found creditable the claims of local villagers that government soldiers had murdered about two dozen youths in Usulutan at the end of November 1983. An officer responsible for an earlier massacre in Sonsonate was removed but not brought to trial. Few commanders have chosen to follow the example of Lieutenant Colonel Ochoa, who established a successful community relations program in Cabanas in 1982. Defense leaders have endorsed socioeconomic reforms, established codes of conduct, tried to keep Air Force bombing away from civilian areas, promoted civic

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action projects, and provided progovernment media exposure. Lack of full endorsement of these measures by some local commanders, however, has weakened their impact. The transfer of a few of the more notorious rightwing officers at the end of November from national staff slots to active field units may have removed the individuals from the limelight but did not remove them from positions of responsibility. Only three were exiled at that time. President Duarte, however, has recently designated three additional officers to leave for overseas posts.

### Military Equipment

El Salvador has revamped its equipment inventories over the past few years, taking advantage of US military aid to begin to standardize weapons throughout the regular forces and purchase new items geared for the counterinsurgency threat (see table 6). Defense leaders maintain contacts with other military suppliers, such as Israel, Taiwan, Chile, and Argentina, but no country besides the United States has come forth with substantial aid or long-term credit arrangements.

**Weapons.** Ground troops now have M-16 assault rifles, M-60 machineguns, 90-mm shoulder-fired recoilless rifles, and 60-mm and 81-mm mortars, replacing an assortment of European-manufactured and older US weapons that were turned over to the public security forces. The transition for existing units was largely completed during 1983, while each new light battalion will receive about \$600,000 worth of weapons and equipment as it is formed. San Salvador also substantially upgraded its field artillery with lightweight M102 105-mm howitzers in the fall of 1983, and put some of the new weapons in the field before the end of the year. By May 1984, 24 howitzers had been received.

The armed forces have been able to put new weapons into use rapidly because the weapons are not technically complex and because training packages have accompanied procurement. However, according to US military reports, field inspections show that weapons are not always well maintained because of training deficiencies and shortages of cleaning kits. Lack of trained forward observers also often limits the useful range of support weapons. Furthermore, Salvadoran

**Table 6**  
**Distribution of US Military Assistance to El Salvador**

	1980	1981	1982	1983
<b>Total assistance</b>	<b>5.9</b>	<b>35.5</b>	<b>80.0</b>	<b>81.0</b>
Distribution of aid by category <sup>a</sup> (percent)				
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
Training	0	3	13	10
Weapons (including small arms and artillery)	1	5	14	16
Communications gear	18	2	5	6
Aircraft and aircraft supplies	0	20	28	8
Boats and naval supplies	0	3	1	4
Ground mobility	65	13	5	1
Sustaining support (including fuel storage and generators)	13	9	4	19
Munitions	1	33	21	30
Other expendables (including medical supplies and clothing)	2	9	4	7
Miscellaneous	0	4	6	0

<sup>a</sup> Because of rounding, components may not add to totals shown.

units have lost substantial numbers of weapons to enemy actions. Cumulative losses since early 1982 could have equipped more than three additional full-size IR battalions.<sup>12</sup> The Intelligence Community estimates that a significant proportion of the enemy's weapons and ammunition needs are met through the capture of government supplies.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> According to both Salvadoran Government and FMLN statistics, about 3,500 weapons of all kinds fell into enemy hands in 1983 alone.

**Communications.** Salvadoran military communications have shown considerable improvement as a result of US attention. PRC-77 tactical radios now form the basis of a forcewide mobile network, providing communications capability between commanders and companies in the field, contact with aircraft flying in support of ground operations, and some interface between public security forces and regular units. Secure telephone, teletype, and radio systems connect field headquarters with the High Command. US military officials acknowledge that the armed forces are still short of PRC-77 sets, but the purchase of 1,000 radios for delivery in spring 1984 should go a long way toward solving tactical communications problems. Too few communications specialists, battery problems, and a general lack of understanding of communications skills, however, continue to result in inefficient use of upgraded equipment.

Poor radio discipline, for example, regularly reveals Army movements to the enemy, and loss of substantial numbers of PRC-77 sets has facilitated guerrilla interference in government communications. In recognition of serious shortcomings, a new General Staff Department was set up in January 1984 to try to improve communications performance.

**Aircraft and Air Force Supplies.** Delivery of more than two dozen US planes and helicopters in 1982 to supplement an aging fleet of Israeli-supplied French planes and replace losses from the Ilopango raid in January brought a strong new dimension to the government's war effort. The Air Force was able to fly combat runs shortly after the planes arrived and has lost only one jet fighter and three helicopters during operations since. Although we do not have statistics on bombing accuracy,

Air Force operations have caused concern within the FMLN. Combat commanders regularly call for air support, relying on small Cessna 0-2s for target identification in advance of air or artillery strikes; A-37 jets for bombing or strafing; Hughes 500 helicopters with long loiter time for saturating minigun fire; or UH-1H helicopters for inserting reconnaissance teams, providing light fire support, delivering supplies to the field, and evacuating wounded. Response is sometimes slow due to command and control confusions, limited nighttime and poor weather flying capability, and competing missions.

Air Force personnel have turned in an excellent performance, however, given extremely limited resources. The 15 UH-1H helicopter pilots, less than half the number El Salvador should have for available helicopters, bear the brunt of air operations, often flying 75 hours in seven days, the US attache reports. The tremendous demand for the use of limited aircraft to resupply ammunition and food to troops in the field has meant that other priority missions such as troop insertion and medevac suffer.

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**Boats and Navy Supplies.** The Salvadoran Navy has shown the least operational improvement of the service branches. The Navy's six new 21-foot patrol boats—bringing its total inventory to about 26 small craft—are complicated to maintain, have high fuel consumption, and are overpowered for Salvadoran needs, according to a US naval observer. Despite the establishment of a small naval commando unit equipped with eight Zodiac inflatable boats, the Navy has rarely deployed the unit on reconnaissance operations. Outside interests, including smuggling, rakeoffs from local fishermen, and the collection of harbor taxes, have distracted the Navy's attention from the war. Although El Salvador has participated in occasional maneuvers with Honduras, patrolling of the Gulf of Fonseca has generally been inadequate,

Patrol activity has increased somewhat in recent months, however, since the replacement of the naval commander.

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Even so, ammunition shortages affecting the level of combat have occurred from time to time.

Shortages have occurred because of aid ceilings, the difficulty of ordering in advance

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and stockpiling under the irregular appropriations timetable, and fluctuations in Salvadoran tactical activity and fire discipline that have made forecasting difficult. El Salvador required an emergency shipment of 5.56-mm ammunition at the end of 1983, for example, after the government's summer offensive and the fall guerrilla resurgence depleted stocks more rapidly than expected.

Even when stocks are on hand, worry about future availability—especially during US Congressional debates over aid legislation—has caused Salvadoran commanders to hoard supplies and reduce operations, according to the US Embassy. The high proportion of aid funds going for munitions has reduced El Salvador's ability to make longer term investments in military hardware and training. The growing need for spare parts as new equipment ages has also begun to increase the pressure to use more aid funds for short-term expendables.

**Transportation.** Guerrilla attacks against El Salvador's transport facilities continue to hinder government efforts to move supplies overland. The insurgents have hit El Salvador's bridges more than 60 times, blowing up the two major spans over the Lempa River and destroying or damaging numerous others. Highways and rail lines are vulnerable to interdiction. Only eight locomotives are still operational out of 28 in January 1980 because of attacks and derailments. The guerrillas have been able to control stretches of major highways, ambushing military convoys, holding up and destroying civilian buses and trucks, and taxing local residents to demonstrate political strength. Almost all supplies are still moved on the ground, and the government has been forced to divert considerable resources to repair routes, install bailey bridges, and tighten security for convoys. In addition, the military has improved security at most major bridges to deter insurgent attacks.

The government does not fully use its air transport capacity. El Salvador has about 30 transport aircraft, most of which can land on short, unimproved airstrips, but the US attache reports that these aircraft are underutilized because of pilot shortages, slow maintenance, and poor scheduling. The government has not tapped the almost 20 commercial pilots who are

available to fly part-time and could relieve the overburdened Air Force pilots of some of their noncombat missions. So far, air delivery has remained relatively safe, although the mining of a runway at San Miguel in early 1984 may presage an increase in this kind of harassment.

**Supply System.** El Salvador's supply management system is only slowly adjusting to wartime needs. US advisers report progress in familiarizing Salvadoran staff officers with complex procurement procedures, but acknowledge little headway in making the traditional supply-driven system responsive to local combat demands. The logistic staff often has withheld supplies from the field to hedge against a feared decline in US aid, according to US military observers. Routine deliveries are made in equal shares to all major commands, both to avoid offending politically powerful local commanders and to compensate for the absence of rational inventory and requisition procedures.

the central staff's reluctance to set priorities and concentrate resources has led to severe frustration on the part of combat commanders in the most contested areas, although improvements are gradually occurring.

Tight central control of supplies clashes with decentralized operational planning. The logistic staff is reluctant to lose leverage over local commanders by stockpiling supplies in forward areas and requires that each request for logistic support be processed through the national bureaucracy. The system has encouraged misreporting of needs in order for commanders to hoard supplies for planned operations. Even with such informal stockpiling, combat campaigns have been cut short when supplies ran out. The improved ability of some units to sustain operations last summer—some stayed in the field longer than a month—reflected the resourcefulness of individual local commanders more than changes in the system, according to knowledgeable US observers.

So far, the government's war effort has failed to stimulate the development of domestic military industries or encourage the private sector to adjust for the

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struggle. Although capital is in short supply, the continuing absence of ammunition plants seems to us a lamentable production weakness. In addition, despite the need for relatively cheap prepackaged combat rations, negotiations with private Salvadoran firms have repeatedly foundered. Combat commanders still have to purchase large quantities of food through commercial channels—often compromising operational security—and deliver bulky items to the field despite poor transport. Furthermore, lack of uniforms and other nonweapon items that are too expensive to import has limited the number of recruits local commanders can induct and has caused morale problems, the US defense attache reports.

**Maintenance.** The military's equipment maintenance system, traditionally characterized by ad hoc repairs and extensive cannibalization, has improved in those sectors receiving US assistance. Standardization of weapons and equipment in general has facilitated the development of stocks of spare parts at central depots, we believe, although many shortages still exist. Attache reporting suggests that aircraft and boat maintenance is becoming adequate. Improved helicopter maintenance has raised the operational readiness rate for UH-1H helicopters from about 30 percent in 1982 to better than 50 percent at present, according to US military reports. While the availability of only about 12 UH-1H helicopters out of 19 frustrates combat planners, US military sources say that the rate is not unreasonable considering the heavy combat use of the aircraft.

The armed forces have made less progress in vehicle maintenance and small arms repair. Having substituted new US weapons for older European models in the regular forces, the country has a large number of arms that could be reconditioned and issued to civil defense units, according to US military assistance personnel. Aid regulations limit US participation in this activity, however, and the Salvadoran Government has shown little initiative. As a result, only a small percentage of civil defense personnel—often the first line of defense in outlying villages—are armed with anything more than machetes.

### Structure

**Geographic Organization.** El Salvador has geographically reshaped its military structure in recent years to face the guerrilla threat. The government doubled the

number of military zones to six by 1982 (see figure 4). In practice, however, control continued to rest with the 14 department commanders, who preferred direct links with the Ministry of Defense. The need to coordinate multiunit operations against an increasingly capable enemy led to experimentation with the theater command concept in late 1982. Although operationally sound, temporary commands continued to founder on staff shortages and local jealousies over the control of forces. In the November 1983 organizational shakeup, the High Command moved significantly closer to aligning the formal Army structure with operational realities by shifting the boundaries of military zones to coincide roughly with enemy fronts.

The government has also increasingly concentrated forces in the most contested areas. Initially, this was accomplished by borrowing units from the less active departments. Colonel Flores, then Commander of the Third Brigade, expressed typical frustration with this approach, however, when he complained to the US defense attache in February 1982 that he could not secure his own military zone around San Miguel while his troops were off patrolling in Usulutan, guarding the Cuscatlan Bridge, relieving the town of Corinto in Morazan, and regaining control of a highway in San Vicente. The expansion of strategic reserve forces in intervening years has enabled the government generally to focus deployments against guerrilla concentrations without leaving less contested areas of the country unprotected (see figure 1).

**Shift to Light Battalions.** In March 1983 the Defense Minister announced plans for the conversion of local garrison units to light battalions. Designed to standardize unit configuration, provide a structure for further force expansion, and facilitate more aggressive small-unit operations, the plan envisaged the creation of 36 350-man battalions countrywide by the end of this year, mainly by combining existing infantry companies and adding staffs and combat support units. The light battalions were scheduled to alternate static defense responsibilities with aggressive patrolling.

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In the wake of a series of guerrilla victories last fall, in which several light battalions were mauled by the insurgents, senior commanders in the east proposed that the 350-man battalion concept be scrapped in favor of battalions having a strength of nearly 600 troops. They argued, according to attache reports, that the lighter battalions were not strong enough or well trained enough to engage in operations. [redacted]

By mid-February, according to our attache, the General Staff had approved the reorganization of the light battalions into counterinsurgency battalions of over 400 personnel augmented in many instances by a 170-man combat support company. In the east, where the fighting has been heaviest, the Army Commander is reorganizing into 600-man battalions. The US Embassy reported recently that the revamping was proceeding. [redacted]

**Command and Control.** The clarification of command relationships has barely kept pace with force development. With new units added, more than 30 military organizations became subordinate to the Armed Forces Staff. This impossibly wide span of control made the General Staff weak and ineffective in managing the war effort. With strong encouragement from US advisers, the Salvadoran chain of command has been evolving toward a system of intermediate levels of authority. In announcing the November realignment of military zones, for example, General Vides reminded subordinate units to report through brigade channels at zone headquarters, according to Embassy reporting. The development of local-force battalions and gradual downgrading of command slots because of officer shortages are diffusing the independent power of local commanders, encouraging reliance on the chain of command. The government has also been parcelling out helicopter and artillery support to regional commands on an informal basis, although stopping short of formal reassignment. Staffing at intermediate levels has also increased, strengthening the ability of brigade headquarters to act as two-way conduits for information between the High Command and field units. [redacted]

The new pattern, however, cannot yet be considered an institutional norm. The elite IR battalions, for example, continue to resist operational control by

local commanders. So far, a hierarchical chain of command reportedly has taken firmest root in those areas such as the 3rd Military Zone in the east where the brigade commander has been able to exert authority by the sheer force of his personality and professional reputation. [redacted]

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**Interservice Coordination.** Some continued operational independence of the Air Force, Navy, and Public Security forces also handicaps the war effort. Because of the nature of the counterinsurgency struggle, the Salvadoran Army has received the lion's share of US assistance, increasing the disparity between that service and other fighting elements. Air Force contributions to the war have increased dramatically, but high-level planning coordination is still uneven. According to attache reports, requests for combat support in the past tended to come straight to the Air Force from field commanders, often over commercial telephone lines. With little direction from the General Staff, Air Force duty officers made their own decisions on mission priorities. Changes in General Staff procedures are improving coordination. The Navy's capabilities remain so poor that even when involved in operational planning—such as during the Jucuarán operations in September 1983—it has been unable to close off the enemy's sea routes of escape. [redacted]

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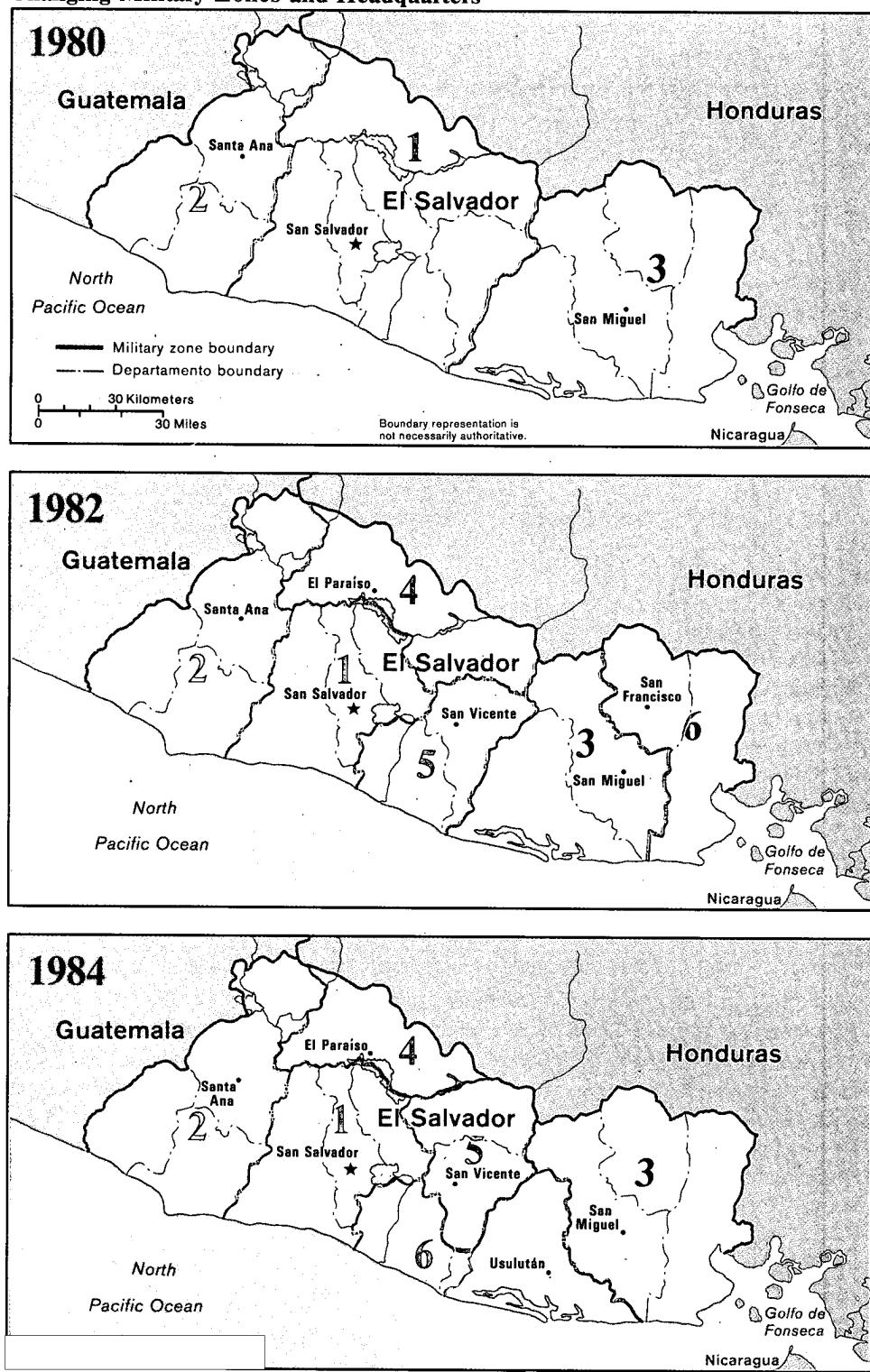
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The integration of the Air Force and Navy into the planning process improved in November 1983 with the inclusion of service representatives at meetings of the General Staff. Neither the powerful chief of the Air Force, Colonel Bustillo, nor a high-level naval officer is part of the strengthened staff organization, however, and improvement in day-to-day coordination has been slow. Despite heavy involvement in the urban and rural ground war, the Public Security forces remain outside regular planning channels. Shunted aside from the US assistance program, the National Guard, National Police, and Treasury Police have neither consolidated their forces nor realigned their organizational boundaries with Army theaters to reinforce the national war effort. [redacted]

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**Figure 4**  
**Changing Military Zones and Headquarters**

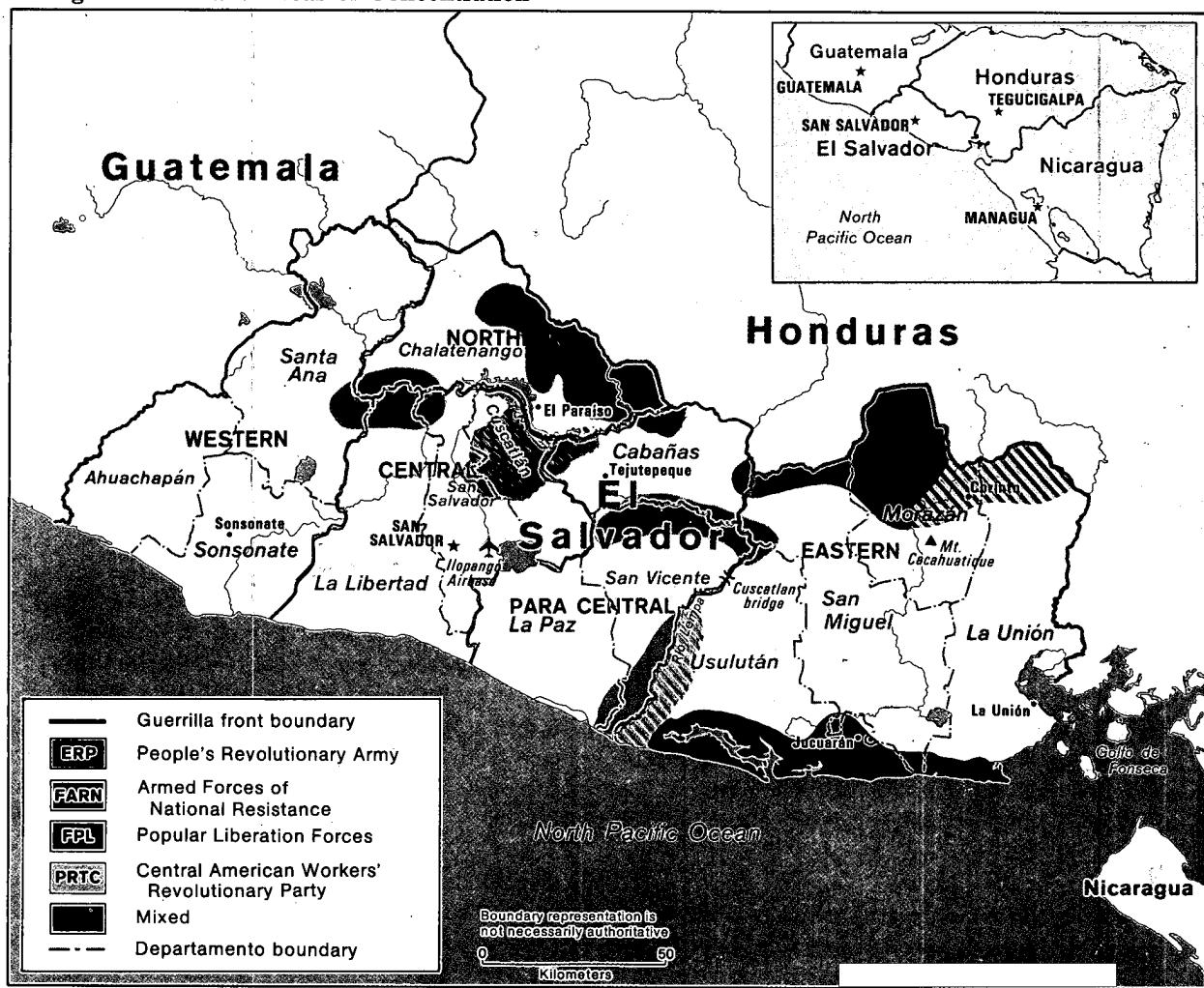


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**Figure 5**  
Insurgent Fronts and Areas of Concentration



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### Strategy and Tactics

**Strategic Planning.** El Salvador has had difficulty in adopting and sticking with a comprehensive national strategy for defeating the insurgents. Having never fought a counterinsurgency, the government had no established doctrine to guide its initial response. Some outstanding individual officers demonstrated energy and resourcefulness, but most resorted to strengthening local defensive positions and engaging in occasional unsuccessful sweep operations, according to our analysis. This piecemeal approach resulted in little overall progress on the battlefield, and defense leaders began to explore alternative strategies with US advisers by early 1983.

The National Plan that emerged called for the concentration of resources to score decisive gains in one area at a time, the use of aggressive small-unit tactics to keep the enemy off balance, the integration of civic action and economic restoration with the military effort, and the expansion of civil defense forces to consolidate combat gains. Implemented first in San Vicente, a well-populated department in the center of the country where guerrillas had successfully disrupted agricultural production, the National Plan began

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with great acclaim in June 1983 and accelerated in July as parallel but smaller operations were initiated throughout the country. Despite much planning and material support from the United States, however, momentum sagged by fall. The experiment, in our view, proved too ambitious for the well-meaning but still inexperienced Salvadoran High Command. The campaign finally moved on to Usulutan in January 1984, but largely without its economic reconstruction and civil defense components.

**Tactical Coordination.** In the absence of an overall strategy, day-to-day operations are determined by a constantly shifting mix of national directives and local initiatives. The High Command controls the purse strings, logistic support, and the flow of intelligence. It also reviews battlefield plans and performance and issues recommendations, but less often orders. In September 1983, for example, defense leaders clarified the procedures for use of close air support in populated areas following civilian deaths in Tenancingo, and a November directive reviewed the steps for avoiding ambushes. On the other hand, local commanders determine the size, timing, targets, and tactics for field operations. In a typical operation, for example, Colonel Flores mounted a three-battalion attack against guerrilla bases near Jucuaran in southern Usulutan in August 1983 with no help from the General Staff in either planning or execution, according to US military observers.

The split in decisionmaking authority has hindered combat effectiveness by encouraging local initiatives while denying commanders the means of consolidating their gains. Tensions run high on both sides. The High Command charges that field officers fail to notify them of pending operations and then complain when intelligence, logistic, and air and navy support are not available on a timely basis. Combat commanders blame the Command for security leaks that compromise operational plans, and negligence in denying resources to rescue units under attack or to sustain field actions.

**Counterinsurgent Tactics.** Over time the armed forces have become more aggressive and more willing to adopt small-unit tactics and occasional night operations. Nevertheless, at the tactical level, many officers remain reluctant to fully employ such tactics. Colonel

Bustillo, the Air Force commander and one of the country's most dedicated leaders, has berated fellow officers for not understanding that the urgency of the national struggle demands field operations 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Although up to 70 percent of Salvadoran forces remained in the field during the summer of 1983, [redacted] this figure declined by fall. A large number of units was once again operating constantly in the spring of 1984, however, to keep the guerrillas off balance during the presidential elections.

Various commanders have explained that shortages of officers and troops and inadequate radios and helicopters have made them reluctant to move out of garrisons with smaller than company-size units even in daytime. [redacted] Although resource shortages are a reality, it appears to us that in many cases officers have used them as a crutch for their traditional defensive philosophy. Manpower, equipment, and training improvements since 1981 have greatly strengthened the offensive potential of the armed forces, we believe. In our view, lack of stronger direction from command authorities, limitations in the size and effectiveness of the training program, and the ingrained reluctance of middle-level officers to risk experimentation with new tactics still inhibit more effective military performance.

Inadequate mobility has also reduced some of the tactical choices open to field commanders. Even the immediate reaction battalions cannot respond on short notice. Not only is the number of trucks inadequate in the field, but the high risk of ambush discourages ground transport altogether. Although guerrilla ambush tactics have become well known, Salvadoran troops continue to ignore security precautions. In April 1983, an 86-man unit from the elite Belloso Battalion, on its way to reinforce a town under attack, traveled down a road with no scouts or flank guard, fell into a trap, and lost almost the entire unit. In November, an Army unit made seven futile attempts to send reinforcements to Tejutepeque down a main road without eliminating or circling around guerrillas at known ambush points.

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With only about 12 helicopters operational at one time, commanders have not been able to airlift large numbers of ground troops on a regular basis. Colonel Bustillo explained to a US Congressional delegation last September that priority missions such as combat resupply leave few helicopters available for troop transport. Because of this, forces have on many occasions lost the element of tactical surprise, failed to cut off retreating insurgent units, and had to pull troops back from threatened forward positions because they could not be reinforced in time. The Arce Battalion took 48 hours to get troops into position for an operation in Morazan in November 1983, for example, giving enemy forces time to slip away. In December, after the leadership reshuffle, we began to see troop transport receive higher priority—eight UH-1H helicopters lifted troops into action near Cacahuatique—but the small number of helicopters available still precludes regular airlift operations.

Despite continuing resource shortages, several outstanding Salvadoran commanders have proved tough and resourceful, according to our analysis, providing models of how the war should be fought. In 1982, Lieutenant Colonel Ochoa in Cabanas was already sending out 11-man patrols at night and combining his military actions with a strong community relations program. In a major operation in Morazan in early 1983, Colonel Flores tried encirclement tactics, leaving some forces behind to secure gains after the primary attack was accomplished instead of large sweeps toward a static blocking force. Lieutenant Colonel Cruz periodically sends companies north of the Torola River in Morazan to flush out insurgent units, then pulls his troops back, and calls in pre-planned airstrikes.

#### Intelligence.

a Salvadoran intelligence service was set up in early 1982, and tactical intelligence courses have better prepared officers and senior enlisted personnel for intelligence staff positions at all levels in the armed forces. By the end of 1983, almost all brigades and major battalions had full-time intelligence chiefs, in contrast to only part-time positions at this level at the end of 1981. With US urging, Army units have paid more attention to the capture and

interrogation of guerrillas.

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reconnaissance units discovered and destroyed an insurgent camp at the mouth of the Lempa River in April 1984. Salvadoran observer aircraft have increased the

Army's visual reconnaissance capability.

The armed forces' ability to use intelligence has not kept pace with collection, however. Poor communications between the General Staff and field commands have proved a major liability in the dissemination of strategic and tactical information. Despite the possibility of undermining the General Staff, US personnel have on occasion felt compelled to deliver data directly to field commanders when staff bottlenecks have prevented operational intelligence from getting to the field.

most of the time-sensitive technical intelligence comes in at night when Salvadoran staff and troops have not been able to respond. All-source tactical operational planning packages from Washington originally were not timely; they took several weeks to prepare, needed updating in the country, and were too complicated for local commanders to use.

Modifications in the packages are improving their usefulness for Salvadoran operations. Independent local commanders and pilots in some cases have been overconfident about their abilities and have failed to heed intelligence produced at the national level. Although commanders are paying increasing attention to their immediate areas,

channels still do not function smoothly for the transmission of local information to the High Command for analysis and dissemination elsewhere in the country.

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